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# CIA refuses to release documents to settle Viet Cong stamp mystery

By Joe Brockert

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency has refused to release or declassify documents that could clear up the mystery surrounding the alleged propaganda forgery of Viet Cong stamps.

For nearly a year now, the philatelic community has been speculating on these reported Viet Cong forgeries, but there is still no evidence that the CIA actually forged its own copies of the Viet Cong stamps. More likely, it simply used genuine copies of the Viet Cong adhesives for its purposes.

Regardless, Linn's attempted to get at the truth with a Freedom of Information Act request to the CIA. The relevant portions of the CIA response, from Larry L. Strawderman, information and privacy coordinator, follow:

"I must inform you that the fact of the existence or nonexistence of such documents in our possession would be classified . . . and would relate directly to information concerning intelligence sources and methods, which the director of Central Intelligence has the responsibility to protect from unauthorized disclosure. . . .

"Therefore, your request is denied . . . By this action we are neither confirming nor denying that the CIA has such documents in its possession."

The whole story began on March 20, 1982, in a Washington Post article, when former CIA agent C. Phillip Liechty charged that the CIA had fabricated evidence to support deeper U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict in the early 1960s. Among those fabrications, he said, were some Viet Cong postage stamps.

These stamps, reportedly

discovered in a file at CIA headquarters by Liechty while he worked there, involved a single design, an example of which is illustrated herewith.

The design was one of five stamps from the first issue of the National Liberation Front (NLF).

Depicted on this particular stamp is a U.S. helicopter, being shot down by two Viet Cong guerrillas.

While the stamp served its own propaganda purposes, the CIA allegedly planned to use the stamp itself for a more elaborate propaganda campaign.

The stamps, according to Liechty, were to be affixed to inflammatory letters supposedly written by Viet Cong sympathizers. These fabricated letters would then somehow fall into the hands of journalists throughout the world, he says.

Whether the stamp — forged or real — was used for this purpose is not known.

However, Liechty feels certain that one prominent display of this particular Viet Cong stamp was inspired by the CIA.

An enlargement of the stamp under a magnifying glass appeared on the cover of Life magazine for Feb. 26, 1965.

That major propaganda victory — if indeed it was — came just two days before the Johnson administration published its famous "white paper" outlining the Vietnam situation, which led directly to escalated U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

There were other aspects of the alleged CIA involvement in helping the United States increase its role in Vietnam, but they are not philatelic.

These included the fabrica-



Were propaganda forgeries of this Viet Cong stamp made by the Central Intelligence Agency? Probably not, but collectors may never know for certain.

tion of "capturing" planted arms and munitions from the Viet Cong to show outside support and other tactics, all of which were reportedly aimed at deceiving the press and painting a picture of a vast "communist plot" behind the Viet Cong.

However, collectors would be unwise to confuse politics and intelligence operations with the philatelic question at hand. Which is, quite simply, did the CIA use genuine Viet Cong stamps for its purposes, or did it create its own forgeries?

The philatelic implications were explored briefly in Linn's shortly after the Post story (Linn's April 19, 1982, page 3).

In late 1982, Linn's contacted Southeast Asian philatelic expert Mark Isaacs, whose in-depth postal history consideration of Viet Cong stamps appeared in Linn's Feb. 7, page 22.

Isaacs expressed doubt about the CIA forgery, and went to great lengths to explain the history and use of Viet Cong stamps.

His basic premise was that there was no need for the CIA to forge this stamp, since genuine examples were abundantly available.

He also discussed the use and validity of Viet Cong stamps during and after the Vietnam conflict.

Isaacs' article drew quite a response. Most interesting were the letters that expressed suspicion that Isaacs was actually a CIA operative attempting to discredit ex-agent Liechty. For anyone who knows Isaacs, this suggestion is simply ludicrous.

Finally, Liechty himself contacted Linn's. His own opinion of the Isaacs article was, "Frankly, I think the story is a sour grapes CIA plant."

However, Liechty had two complaints. First was the headline implication that he had perpetrated a hoax; and second was that the data had

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